Outcasts, Hoboes, and Freight-hoppers: Riding the Freight Trains in Boxcar Bertha (Martin Scorsese, 1972), Emperor of the North (Robert Aldrich, 1973), and Bound for Glory (Hal Ashby, 1976)*

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In the late 1960s to the mid-1970s several American films whose core subject was peculiarly similar were released, tackling either the economic conditions of poor whites and/or the lives of transients on the railroads during the Great Depression. The consistency of this movie cycle –which featured Sydney Pollack's *This Property is Condemned* (1966), Martin Scorsese's *Boxcar Bertha*, Robert Aldrich's *Emperor of the North*, Hal Ashby's *Bound for Glory*, Martin Ritt's *Sounder* (1972), Walter Hill's *Hard Times* (1975) and Robert Altman's remake of Nicholas Ray's 1948 *They Live by Night* into *Thieves Like Us* in 1974 – was reinforced by two specific traits. First, the release date of each movie (the late 1960s to mid-1970s) and the chosen context of these movies (the 1930s) made them stand together as a cluster. Second and most of all, the actors starring in these movies contributed to the construction of the movie cycle, via their own intertextuality. Members of the Carradine "acting dynasty" appeared in four of the seven movies – John Carradine in *Boxcar Bertha*, his son David Carradine in *Boxcar Bertha* and *Bound for Glory*, and his other son Keith Carradine in *Emperor of the North* and *Thieves Like Us*. The intertextual link[1] between the Carradine family of actors was made even stronger in *Bound for Glory*, as the movie frequently referenced John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), in which John Carradine had played former preacher Jim Casy. The film also stands as the major reference for the Depression era for many audiences and film directors, hence the frequent references in later films.

The central subject matter of this filmic cycle could be linked to the complex economic situation of the United States in the 1970s. Such a context could account for the return to what is pictured in the movies as hard times, yet a time when American "folks" cherished simpler values, such as connecting with other people and the establishment of a culture of the people, by the people. *Boxcar Bertha*, *Emperor of the North*, and *Bound for Glory* are also typical "of the 1970s" in the sense that the legacy of the counter-culture and opposition to the Vietnam War is felt in the direct or indirect criticism of the "Establishment"

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[1] According to Robert Stam, every movie actor brings to the screen the memory of his past roles: "In the cinema the performer also brings along a kind of baggage, a thespian intertext formed by the totality of antecedent roles. Thus Lawrence Olivier brings with him the intertextual memory of his Shakespeare performances, just as Madonna brings the memory of the various *personae* of her music videos." Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation", in James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (London/New York: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 54-76, 60. With the Carradine "dynasty", one could argue that the memory of past roles embodied by John Carradine seeps into the roles held by his sons, especially in *Bound for Glory* which boasts numerous references to *The Grapes of Wrath* film adaptation.

or authority figures[2] (such as the State – often embodied by the police or the train magnates). A return to the Depression era, in which the struggle of common folks against the Establishment was prominent, makes sense in the context of the 1970s. Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller offer the following hypothesis for the existence of such a cluster of Depression-era train films in the 1970s: "We might wonder why movies featuring trains were so popular at that time; was there a particular societal sense of anomie, rootlessness, and/or desire for freedom then?"[3]

Boxcar Bertha, *Emperor of the North*, and *Bound for Glory* focus on trains and the train-hopping practice, or rather the freight-hopping practice, which was common fare in the 1930s, yet seldom pictured in American cinema other than as an afterthought after William Wellman's *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) or Preston Sturges' satirical *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). The car or the motorcycle were the tools by which American space was frequently appropriated in the movies or literature, especially after Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) or *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), considered as the quintessential road movie.[4] Yet, after this film, some film directors left cars and motorcycles aside to focus on the train, and specifically the freight train: the preferred transportation mode of the down-and-out, those who cannot afford a car or a motorcycle. *Emperor of the North* depicts the lives of Depression-era hoboes[5] and their train-hopping contests; *Boxcar Bertha* was more concerned with the fight of union members against big train tycoons and the subsequent transformation of those union members into outlaws; the biopic *Bound for Glory* recounted the life of folk singer Woody Guthrie and his quest for inspiration among small folks aboard trains.

Though these films may deal with trains in very different ways, they all share common themes, aesthetics, and even generic markers. In fact, these railroad films could be considered as part of a cycle within the road movie genre.[6] Apart from their Depression-era setting, what makes *Boxcar Bertha*, *Emperor of the North* and *Bound for Glory* original compared to the western movies of the same period, is the choice of the train as something more than a convenient means of transportation or a symbol of class issues. The railroad, its trains and locomotives are used both as semantic and syntactic markers of a movie subgenre

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[2] Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), a motion picture which also highlights the struggle of the individual against the Establishment, is another strong example of a dictatorial authority figure.

[3] Paul Loukides, Linda K. Fuller, eds., "Introduction", *Beyond the Stars 3: The Material World in American Popular Film* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1993), 1-2.

[4] Ina Rae Hark and Steven Cohan's opus *The Road Movie Book* begins with *Easy Rider* as one of the major occurrences of the road movie.

[5] The concept of the hobo in American urban centers was researched by Nels Anderson in his seminal book *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, published in 1923. Though the words "tramp", "hobo", "vagrant" and "bum" were often used interchangeably by most American writers (notably John Dos Passos and Jack Kerouac), it is the concept of "hobo" which seems to be associated with a life on the rails. Hoboes, more than tramps and bums, refer to those men looking for work who hopped on and off trains in search of a brighter future. Nels Anderson's sociological study probably influenced this perception of the hobo.

[6] Apart from this specific Depression-era cycle, many other films of the 1970s deal with trains, but they tend to remain centered on the American West and are often regarded as westerns rather than as road movies, the main characters being outlaws who pillage trains *à la* Jesse James – such as *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (Abraham Polonsky, 1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), *The Train Robbers* (Burt Kennedy, 1973) and *Posse* (Kirk Douglas, 1975).

(one might call "the rail movie") which allows for a redefinition of the American dream through social criticism and satire.

A remarkable aspect of *Emperor of the North*, *Boxcar Bertha*, and up to a certain extent, *Bound for Glory*, is the fact that these films are interspersed with sequences which directly take on and expose traditionally-held American myths of classlessness, equality and freedom. Many later films dealing with life on freight trains tend to focus on the mythic beauties of the railroad and the nostalgia for empty and free American landscapes, as in some road movies. They omit the often dire conclusions drawn by *Emperor of the North, Boxcar Bertha* and *Bound for Glory*, which rather mirror the tragic end sequences in *Easy Rider*. On the other hand, the interesting use of train imagery is made in all these films to redefine American life and space at a time when cars were omnipresent. More readily than the car, the train as the means of transportation of the homeless and the voiceless, seems to enable access to political and social criticism. This criticism is systematically highlighted by the aesthetics of ambivalence: the railroad is both beautiful and horrid, and life on the railroad is both one of freedom and entrapment. This seems to confirm that genre dynamics are at play in the three above-mentioned films according to Rick Altman's definition of movie genres in *Film/Genre*, as they paint a collective portrait of the "Other America" where the road (or in this case, the rail) is no longer an indicator of freedom and open space, but rather of stasis and of death.[7]

Ambivalent aesthetics as a generic convention? – Beauties and horrors of the railroad

The genre dynamics of *Emperor of the North*, *Boxcar Bertha* and *Bound for Glory* are expressed via a combination of codes or generic conventions that are specifically linked to the practice of freight-hopping. Such generic conventions help make these three films stand together as filmic representations of "the unseen" of America – revealing the political message of the films. Music is one of the first noticeable codes, as it is often used directly in the title sequences of the movies. The soundtracks, which tend to include country music, already indicate the orientation of the films, as country music is a common way to refer to "the people", the common folks who are traditionally made invisible by the wealthy and the privileged in Hollywood cinema. This idea is paramount to *Bound for Glory*, as Woody Guthrie's music allows the campers to gather and revolt against figures of authority, and it is also present in the other two movies. The theme song of *Emperor of the North* is aptly titled "A Man and a Train," sung by the country and western superstar Marty Robbins. The lyrics of the song hint at the contents of the movie, as it compares the respective powers of man and train and concludes that a man can go farther than a train because of his innate need to achieve his dreams ("The minute that a train runs out of steam it's gotta stop / But it's a different story when a man runs out of steam / He still can go a long, long way / On nothing but a dream"). The country song is used as a generic convention, a semantic marker which encapsulates a specific syntax. The train is used by men as more than a tool for travel. It has become the instrument of their own aspirations.

[7] "What do these texts have in common? What shared structures permit them to make more meaning as a genre than the sum of their meanings as individual texts?". Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 50.

In *Emperor of the North*, the message is also political in nature, though perhaps less obviously than in *Bound for Glory* or *Boxcar Bertha*. The film clearly takes pains to picture the lives of the unseen, the "hoboes" that hide along the train tracks and are regularly beaten by the system (embodied by the character Shack, a conductor obsessed with keeping hoboes from riding his train). Apart from Jack London's memoir *The Road,*[8] Christopher Knopf's script for *Emperor* was partly inspired by Leon Ray Livingston's books featuring the hero A-Number-One and depicting his life as a freight-hopping hobo. Livingston said his work was inspired by hearing the country song "Big Rock Candy Mountain" in which a hobo tells of a hobo paradise as he is walking down a train track. *Boxcar Bertha*'s soundtrack is similarly pervaded with country music tones, but in the case of the title sequence, the music hovers over darker images of the Great Depression era. This title sequence starts with harmonica playing (the quintessential country music instrument), which initially appears light and merry, over quick close-ups on railroad tracks and train wheels. However, the sequence swiftly juxtaposes music with images of demonstrating crowds, newspaper articles showcasing the unemployed, and close-ups on policemen who are threateningly playing with their police batons.

The same association between trains and country music is found in later films depicting the practice of train-hopping. For instance, Coppola's *The Outsiders* (1983) features a freight train sequence with Elvis Presley's song "Mystery Train" as its soundtrack. In the Coen Brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), which draws its references from Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*, the sequence in which the three convicts try to hop on a freight-train is preceded by the credit sequence whose soundtrack is, tellingly, "Big Rock Candy Mountain." Just as in *Sullivan's Travels*, and in other movies of the 1970s, when the convicts hop on the freight train, they come face to face with several blank-faced hoboes. The shot stresses the direct connection between trains and hobo culture by making hoboes the expected feature of the freight trains. What is striking is not only the satire which results from Everett's long-winded speech and the hoboes' silence, but also the stark contrast between the aesthetization of the shot, emphasized by the yellow-tinted lens or the beautiful landscape of fields seen through the car door, and the dire conditions the hoboes obviously find themselves in. This ambivalent treatment of life on the railroads is also an important theme in *Boxcar Bertha*, *Emperor of the North*, and *Bound for Glory*.

The first sequences of *Emperor of the North* highlight the combination of beauty and horror that characterizes life on the railroads. The first sequence includes several tracking shots of a freight train moving through a golden field bordered by dark green woods and mountains, perfectly matching the words Emerson used to characterize the railroads in his essay "The Young American", as he called railroad iron "the magician's rod, in its power to invoke the sleeping power of land and water".[9] The locomotive is viewed through several angles to accentuate the beauty of the train machine – the moving wheels, the steaming chimney – as it is running its course. The train is then shown via an aerial shot picturing its

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[8] Jack London wrote about his experience as a hobo in the 1890s in his autobiographical memoir *The Road*, first published in 1907. In this memoir, he chronicled how he hopped on freight trains during one of the worst economic recessions the United States had ever known and how he fought against train crews who wanted to push him off the trains.

[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature Addresses and Lectures* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1854), 364.

entire "body" cutting through the golden field, before the camera moves to the front of the train, so that the viewer is given the impression that he is standing on the tracks with the train moving towards him. These shots obviously work as establishing shots, signaling the core subject of the movie, but they already point at its main motif: the desire to master the daunting train machinery, as conveyed by the last shot which invites the viewer to stand on the tracks facing the moving train. The frequent use of such camera techniques, which creates a confrontation between the audience and the spectacle of the moving train, is reminiscent of what Tom Gunning has called "the cinema of attractions."[10] The train is the ideal tool to solicit the viewer, a motif which is present in all three films. The classic simile between the train and the movie camera, outlined as follows by Lynne Kirby, makes its appearance early on in the movie:

> The train can be seen as providing the prototypical experience of looking at a framed, moving image, and as the mechanical double of the cinematic apparatus. Both are a means of transporting a passenger to a totally different place, both are highly charged vehicles of narrative events, stories, intersections of strangers, both are based on a fundamental paradox: simultaneous motion and stillness.[11]

Emperor of the North introduces another fundamental paradox of the train in the credit sequence, right after these establishing shots, presenting the train as a deadly machine in which beauty and horror work side by side. A hobo makes for the train in the intent to hop on a car as the train slows down, but he is spotted by Shack, who hits him on the head with a hammer, causing him to fall on the tracks. The ensuing gruesome shots that a fundamental paradox of the train and the railroad: they enable men to follow their dreams by steering them through the beautiful American landscape, as the soundtrack "A Man and a Train" indicates, but they can also lead to horrible deaths. The camera shows the body of the man falling onto the track first through a top shot, then through a tracking shot that follows the train crushing him beneath its wheels. The last shot of the sequence shows the man lying perpendicularly to the track, cut in two, with his arms extended in a crucified Christ-like stance (Fig.1). The man's dream of travel is literally cut down by the train, but his posture indicates that he also stands as a martyr to the cause of hoboes looking to hitch a free ride. The remainder of this credit sequence underscores the ordinariness of such an event, as the merry music continues over numerous shots at various angles of the steaming locomotive and the train wheels. Right from the start, *Emperor of the North* presents the train as an ambivalent means of transportation, both beautiful and deadly. Interestingly, *Emperor of the North* was filmed on the same stretch of tracks that Buster Keaton used for *The General* in 1926.

In *Boxcar Bertha*, the apparent contradiction between horror and beauty is also present, first in the credit sequence mixing various frightening Depression-era images, and, above all, in the last sequence in which the union activist, Big Bill Shelly (David Carradine) is nailed to the side of a boxcar by Sartoris's men – Sartoris is the evil railroad baron who owns the railroads in that part of the country (Fig.2). The last shot embraces the beauty as well as the horror of the railroad, when a high-angle tracking shot shows Bill's crucified body

[10] Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 6-7.

[11] Lynne Kirby, "Male Hysteria and Early Cinema", in Constance Penley and Sharon Willis, eds., *Male Trouble* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 67.

hanging from the boxcar at the bottom right, while the rest of the screen shows Bertha (Barbara Hershey) running alongside the train, before she is gradually left behind by the moving train. As in *Emperor of the North*, men's dreams are brutally cut short. Yet, the numerous train sequences in *Boxcar Bertha* also foreground the pull exerted by the train on vagrants, just as in Aldrich's film. For instance, during the first train robbery sequence in the middle of the movie, the camera zooms in several times on a black locomotive engine which is moving down the track, showing the red embers burning at its core. Then, after a cut to a long shot of the train now moving towards a car parked on the track, the camera zooms in again, capturing the clash between the railway engine and the exploding car. These zooms play up the formidable locomotive, as it crushes the car in an impressive explosion of contrasting colors, black and red against the dark green forest, while the four members of the gang rabidly watch and wait for the results of their scheme. The train is attractive and deadly – and attractive *because* it is so deadly. The life of crime chosen by Bertha and her companions inevitably involves choosing the train as their transportation mode, as the train mirrors the dangerous turn their lives have taken.

What is striking in the train aesthetics of *Boxcar Bertha*, compared to *Emperor of the North* and *Bound for Glory*, is the frequent emphasis on the train as a mode of entrapment rather than as a means to go from one place to another. This is illustrated in the movie poster, which shows Bertha standing between two stopped trains, holding a rifle. The trains and the tracks occupy much of the background, and Bertha is seen from a low-angle which creates the impression that the trains are closing in on her. The film is advertised in the following terms: "Life made her an outcast. Love made her an outlaw." Bertha stands *out* – out of society and its rules, deep in the world of running trains.

In *Bound for Glory*, trains are presented in a less ominous fashion. The camera frequently zooms in on the beautiful machinery of the train, or on Woody Guthrie's efforts to cling to the train when it is already moving at a tremendous pace. This time, as in *Emperor of the North*, the train is pictured as Leo Marx's "machine in the garden,"[12] emphasized by the end sequences that feature a train snaking through a beautiful pastoral landscape over a soundtrack of Guthrie's "Bound for Glory" song. The song is a hymn to freedom: "nobody living can ever stop me, as I go walking down the freedom highway, nobody living can make me turn back, this land was made for you and me." Yet other moments in the film conspicuously show the lack of freedom of the transients, especially when they are met by a self-appointed militia at a town stop. The ambivalence of freight train imagery, both romantic and frightening, beautiful and ugly, pastoral and industrial, is often explored by film directors,[13] and Hal Ashby is no exception. In the sequence where the transients are prevented from going further by the militia, the train no longer works as a means of transportation, a way to go further, but rather as an instrument of social and literal stasis: only those who can pay the fare can continue their train journey; the others will be left on the (wrong?) side of the tracks. Trains and railroads work as devices which help reinforce the political and social messages of these movies. The ambivalent semantics of trains gives way

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[12] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[13] For instance Terrence Malick's freight train sequence in *Days of Heaven* (1978) underlines the ambivalence of train imagery through its over-aesthetization of the dramatic scene of migrant workers packed on a freight train on their way to find work in the fields of Texas.

to an ambivalent syntax: instead of promoting movement, trains and railroads tend to block their passengers, or at the very least, foreground the constant lack of upward mobility in American society. Robert Rosenstone has pointed out that Hal Ashby's biopic on Woody Guthrie omits most of his political leanings,[14] yet one could argue that the political message is still there – in the representation of class struggle and folk revolts, rather than voiced by one single man. Grouped together, *Emperor of the North*, *Boxcar Bertha* and *Bound for Glory* paint a picture of an America riddled with economic injustice and social violence. In such a cluster, the characters tend to function as archetypes, even in a biographical film.

Archetypal hoboes – when the railroads foreground social, economic and gender crises

Even though the characters may be presented as individuals in these movies, they all stand for something bigger. This is clearly displayed in *Emperor of the North*, as the three main characters work as archetypes, which is indicated by their nicknames (A-Number-One, Shack, Cigaret). This was intentional on the part of Aldrich, as he stated in a 1977 interview:

> I'll never understand exactly why *Emperor of the North* failed. I thought the symbols were so clear. It never occurred to me that the audience would miss the relationship – that Borgnine was the Establishment, that Marvin was the anti-Establishment individualistic character, and that Keith Carradine was the opportunistic youth who would sell out for whatever was most convenient.[15]

The title sequence, with its capitalization of "Railroad Man" and "Trains", further foregrounds the symbolic quality of the characters and the train. The message contained in this title sequence is also highly political, as it delineates the constant struggle of the down-and-out in the United States of the 1930s:

> 1933, the height of the Great Depression. Hoboes roamed the land, riding the rails in a desperate search for jobs. Spurned by society, unwanted and homeless, they became a breed apart. Nomads who scorned the law and enforce their own. Dedicated to their destruction was the RAILROAD MAN who stood between them and their only source of survival – the TRAINS.

Shack's identity is entirely merged with the train; in the movie, he is inseparable from his machine, and the route taken by locomotive Number 19 is tied in with Shack's route in the eyes of the hoboes. Ernest Borgnine's acting and demeanor match the brutality of the train engine: his face is rough, frequently contorts in anger, he scowls and frowns constantly (a trait reinforced by his bushy eyebrows), and his dark clothes match the color of the locomotive. In that sense, Shack is the quintessential movie villain – the grotesque monster, whose contorted body mirrors his distorted soul (Fig.3). He is more nimble and cunning than most hoboes when it comes to riding a train, a feature which makes him extremely dangerous. He uses his cunning to devise ways to torture freight-hoppers. One of the most memorable sequences of the movie corresponds to when Shack uses a coupling pin to injure

[14] In "Reds as History", Robert A. Rosenstone notes that *Bound for Glory* "waffles about its hero's political connections, ignores his relationship to the Communist Party, and never mentions his weekly column in the *People's World*". Instead, "Guthrie comes across as a man of the people, the balladeer of dust-bowl migrants who suffer from ecological disaster and exploitation at the hands of large landowners. His forebears are as much cinematic as historical, for in its message the film is a kind of *Grapes of Wrath* revisited." Robert A. Rosenstone, "Reds as History", *Reviews in American History*, vol.10, no. 3 (September 1982), 298.

[15] Robert Aldrich, "Interview with Stuart Byron, 1977", in Edwin T. Arnold and Eugene L. Miller, eds., *Robert Aldrich: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 120.

Cigaret first, and then A-Number-One when they are riding under the cars holding on to the rods. The film classically sets up the eternal struggle between the Establishment and those who defy the Establishment. However, even if A-Number-One wins the fight in the end, throwing both Shack and Cigaret off the train, the struggle knows no end. A-Number-One may have become "the Emperor of the North Pole", the title, as already indicated by A-Number-One himself, "means nothing"[16] and, as Shack's last words suggest ("you ain't seen the last of me"), this last movie fight is just one among many. The future is still bleak for the hoboes, in spite of then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's promises of a New Deal (which A-Number-One pointedly chooses not to listen to during the camp scene by switching off the radio) – if only because the next generation, embodied by Cigaret, is even more individualistic, amoral and greedy than the previous one.

The political message of *Boxcar Bertha* is quite similar. As the title sequence indicates, the story is that of countless Americans who suffered from the Great Depression and were forced, like Bertha and her friends, to look for money wherever they could (and often in the wrong places), defying the Establishment, represented here by the train magnates, the union breakers, and the police. The results of such defiance are much the same, since Bill ends up crucified to the side of a boxcar by Sartoris's thugs as Bertha lies helpless on the dirt road. This time, however, the struggle goes beyond the general concepts of Establishment / anti-Establishment, as the movie represents this opposition in rather explicit terms by designating different economic and social groups, whereas *Emperor of the North* deals exclusively with white male characters. Bertha and her friends stand for all those who were left aside in the American society of the 1930s (and probably the 1970s as well, although that decade saw the rise of women's liberation and black power): women, African-Americans (one of them being Von Morton, played by Bernie Casey, in Bertha's posse), and white men of various backgrounds (in the film a union activist in the persona of Big Bill Shelly and a Yankee gambler with the character of Rake Brown). Because they are pictured as social and racial outcasts, frowned upon by the white elite (embodied by Sartoris and the like), the film is able to represent the harsh conditions of the Great Depression in the US: misogyny and violence against women, who are forced to work in a whorehouse to survive, racial violence, or on the contrary white privilege. Unlike *Emperor of the North*, *Boxcar Bertha* overtly depicts the conditions of minorities during the Great Depression, perhaps partly because the film is an exploitation movie intended for the exploitation market by producer Roger Corman – which may have given Martin Scorsese some freedom to deal with the subject. In focusing on women and minority characters, *Boxcar Bertha* stands out in the realm of motion pictures featuring hoboes and hobo culture.

Indeed, In *Slippery Characters*, Laura Browder points out that hoboes started to be represented exclusively as poor white males in the 1930s, and were treated as an ethnic group by journalists and sociologists, among them American sociologist Nels Anderson:

> In the 1930s [hoboes] became symbols of a depoliticized poverty, as a group of working-class, native-born whites with no political valence. In a time when capitalism appeared to be failing spectacularly and when some government programs offered at least opportunities for minorities and women, hoboes were seen by sociologists as symbols of the tragedy of the lost opportunities facing white, male, native-

[16] The title "Emperor of the North Pole" is a reference to a Great Depression-era hobo joke according to which the world's best hobo was "Emperor of the North Pole": a way of saying that the best hobo would rule over the wasteland that was the world of hoboes during the Great Depression.

> born Americans. It was no longer clear that Anglo-Saxon heritage guaranteed participation in upward mobility; in fact, it was clear that it did not.[17]

Depicting the lives of those hoboes goes hand in hand with riding freight trains, as they are the ideal means of transportation for those without money. In *Bound for Glory*, Woody Guthrie states that trains are where the "real folks" are – which implies that the real American folks are the poor whites – and where he would draw inspiration for his music. For Guthrie, the only way to reach the heart of America was to keep on riding trains with the other hoboes. Laura Browder's comment on the "depoliticized representation" of hoboes echoes the fact that Hal Ashby disregarded Woody Guthrie's political leanings in the movie. In *Bound for Glory*, most of the hoboes are conspicuously poor whites, just as in *Emperor of the North*. The hobo camps in *Boxcar Bertha*, *Emperor of the North* and *Bound for Glory* are almost exclusively white and male (which is partly why Bertha stands out so prominently in the camp, and on the freight trains). Women and African-Americans are an exception, even though Guthrie bonds with an African-American man during his first train trip. It seems that in each of these three films, at the heart of an economic crisis, there is also a crisis of white masculinity, a theme which pervades many 1970s movies,[18] as the decade was fraught with challenges to white masculinity, such as the Vietnam War and minority movements. In any case, viewing *Emperor of the North* in that light adds another meaning to the ultimate fight between A-Number-One and Shack, and to a certain extent between A-Number-One and Cigaret, as it turns into a fight between male egos.

Trains themselves remain an eminently masculine business. From railroad tycoons to station employees, trains are the prerogative of men. At the heart of the practice of freight-train hopping, which – as already underlined – is much more than a simple means to travel, there is a story of domination: conquering the rails, demonstrating one's strength, dominating the Other, both socially and economically (this is especially apparent when the films evoke the class struggle between the railroad magnates and the union activists). However, the conclusions drawn by the three movies are quite bleak, as the characters' travels end up in death, or lead them back to where they started.

The representation of freight-hoppers: an ambivalent syntax of freedom and entrapment

Even though the train tracks are frequently shown in the form of straight lines, going from one point to the next (from New Orleans to Portland in *Emperor of the North*, Oklahoma to California in *Bound for Glory*, various towns in Arkansas in *Boxcar Bertha*), these movies tend to follow a circular pattern. Woody Guthrie returns to a life on freight trains in *Bound for Glory*, while in *Emperor of the North* the audience is warned that the fight between Shack and A-Number-One is not over yet ("you ain't seen the last of me"). In *Boxcar Bertha*, train travel leads only to death. At one point, in *Boxcar Bertha*, the freight-hoppers believe that they have reached Memphis, but it turns out they are still stuck in Arkansas. As Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the film:

[17] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 172.

[18] Other examples of white masculine malaise can be found in *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), or *The Day of the Locust* (John Schlesinger, 1975).

> There are some good visuals in the movie: a shot of convicts running between piles of lumber, a shot of the gang running down a seemingly endless cattle chute, and the curiously circular use of the railway. Bertha and her gang are forever hopping freights, and once they even think they've made it to Memphis, but all their train rides take them back to where they were before, as if Godot were waiting at the end of the line.[19]

The destination is not the point of freight-hopping, though it may appear so at first sight. In *Boxcar Bertha*, the aimlessness of the group is soon apparent, and their adventures are often the result of their lack of economic choice. In *Emperor of the North*, reaching Portland on Route 19 is shown as the train's true destination, but A-Number-One's last words to Cigaret reveal that there is not much of a future for the rugged, individualistic American hobo, as the younger generation lack the qualities to become heroic hoboes: "Kid, you ain't got no class. You could have been a meat-eater, kid. But you didn't listen… You had the juice, kid, but not the heart, and they both go together."

Underneath the veneer of community and collective rebellion, train-hopping is a solitary practice, fraught with pointlessness. In *Emperor of the North*, the rebellion embodied by A-Number-One seems quite pointless – actually just as senseless as being "Emperor of the North Pole" and ruling over a wasteland. In *Boxcar Bertha*, rebellion ends in death: the death of the union activists, the death of love, as the thugs hired by Sartoris symbolically nail an ace of hearts card above Bill's crucified body, as well as the death of the romantic representation of the train as a vehicle to freedom – here symbolized by the train taking Bill's body away from Bertha. In *Bound for Glory*, Woody Guthrie opts for a life of loneliness on the rails, leaving his family and friends behind.

These movies also use the aesthetics of the circle, as they all begin with trains and end with trains, making train travel endless and destination-less. The exterior views displayed during the characters' travels, when they are visible (in *Boxcar Bertha*, most of the train action is actually contained in the enclosed spaces of the boxcars), do not reveal a horizon but often blurry landscapes. Unlike the car in road movies, the train is not an extension of the human body, and therefore less liable to control. The riders do not actually choose their destination (as evidenced by Bertha and her friends' misbelief that they have reached Memphis, or the fact that in *Emperor of the North* the goal is not really to reach Portland *per se* but to follow the route of locomotive 19 up to Portland). It is striking that two of the films feature scenes in which the characters do manage to stop trains or steer them away from their paths, which highlights, by contrast, the fact that trains cannot usually be steered away from their paths, and usually function as tragic devices. In *Emperor of the North*, A-Number-One and Cigaret manage to hop on a train by spreading grease on the rails, or after tampering with the switch. In *Boxcar Bertha*, the gang manages to stop the train and rob the passengers by parking a car on the tracks and waiting for the train to crash into it.

Though often romanticized in the movies, the life of the freight-hopping hobo is bleak. The economic conditions of hoboes make collective rebellion and community-building difficult, as illustrated in the three movies. In *Bound for Glory*, when Guthrie first hops a freight-train, he soon finds himself in a brawl involving every single transient in the boxcar. In *Boxcar Bertha*, when Bertha and Rake hop a freight train to escape from the police, Rake tries to play cards with other hoboes, but realizes that the hoboes are completely unwilling

[19] Roger Ebert, "Boxcar Bertha", *The Chicago Sun-Times*, July 19, 1972.

to communicate (there is a very similar scene in *Sullivan's Travels* where Sullivan's attempts to discuss politics with hoboes are met with empty stares and deafening silence). In *Emperor of the North,* A-Number-One is an aging and rather disillusioned hobo.

Katie Mills notes in her article "Revitalizing the Road Genre": "If we find nothing else unanimous about adventure road films, we might agree that they appeal to that darker side of people's psyches where rebellion thrives, wild and free".[20] The characters in the three movies do rebel against the Establishment, but their rebellion is either cut short (in *Boxcar*) or inconclusive to the point of absurdity (*Emperor of the North* and *Bound for Glory*), which is striking for Aldrich's film, as the director was well-known for his skill in filming personal confrontations. Perhaps because they appeal to the unseen America, those who are always left behind, trains do not display the same positive qualities as the cars on the open road in road movies. They are a very ambivalent transportation mode, for while seemingly offering the promise of freedom and rebellion, trains are difficult and dangerous engines which, paradoxically enough, highlight to what extent freight-hoppers remain entrapped by their living conditions. The myth of an America in which one can move upward, from rags to riches, is peculiarly absent from these three movies. Instead of promoting motion, trains indicate social and economic stasis. *Boxcar Bertha* paints a striking picture of this absence of forward motion and of upward mobility when it opposes the train tycoon, Sartoris, and the gang of hoboes during the train tycoon's party. During the scene, the women wear crowns and all the guests are dressed as aristocrats, implying that wealth is "inherited" and aristocratic in nature, and therefore cannot be reached by the people at the bottom of the social ladder. In *Bound for Glory*, the people in the work camps are crushed by the system, and have no choice but to submit to the Establishment; Guthrie himself ends up as part of the system when he accepts to work for the radio. A-Number-One's decision not to listen to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech in *Emperor of the North* is telling. There is not much space on the railroads for rebellion to "thrive, wild and free".[21]

In *Dancing in the Dark*, Morris Dickstein writes that during the Great Depression:

> Along with the mythology of the road, with its hardships and manly liberties, there developed a mythology of the free and poor society of equals, a society born of desperation as much as of dreams, where the gruff and timid, the maimed and the hardy, could live together in some kind of rough harmony.[22]

In the 1970s, it seems that the mythology of this poor society of equals is not given much chance to exist. On the contrary, these films highlight the inner contradictions of the hobo communities. In *Boxcar Bertha*, Bertha and Rake are kicked out of the hobo camp as soon as the others find out that Rake is a Yankee; in *Emperor of the North*, A-Number-One realizes in the end that Cigaret was not looking to partner with him, but rather to compete against him. The railroads seem to be spaces where American mythologies meet a dead end. In that, they are not far removed from road movies of the same period, notably *Easy Rider* and Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), in which American dreams are also cut short.

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[20] Katie Mills, "Revitalizing the Road Genre", in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds, *The Road Movie Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 307.
[21] See note 20.
[22] Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 61.

General conclusion

The parallel made by the films between the 1930s and the 1970s is telling. The films are deeply ambivalent, on the one hand minutely recreating the atmosphere of the 1930s, often imbued with nostalgia, and on the other hand foregrounding how the dreams of equality and freedom of the 1950s and 1960s social and political movements had come to an end. The crisis of white masculinity, come under attack with the Vietnam war and the challenges presented by the women's liberation movement and the civil rights movement, the 1973 oil shock and the ensuing economic crisis. Moreover, by the 1970s it had already become apparent that the liberation movements had not reached all their goals, may account for such a disillusioned indirect outlook on 1970s America – an America which, perhaps, was just as bleak as it had been during the years of the Great Depression. The film style of Aldrich, Scorsese and Ashby, directors who were not completely inside the system nor completely outside it, and whose films could all belong to what Robert Kolker called "the cinema of loneliness,"[23] matched the ambivalence of the films with a narrative energy that never finds a real, conclusive outcome. Roger Ebert concluding words to his review of *Emperor of the North*, "The movie's energies are vast but never focused; what we're finally left with is too much undirected violence and some superb direction in an uncertain cause,"[24] could indeed apply to all three films.

[23] Robert Kolker, *The Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Coppola, Scorsese, Altman* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980).
[24] Roger Ebert, Review of *Emperor of the North*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, July 3, 1973.